

SUSTAINING THE VISION AND MISSION OF THE AFRICAN UNION (AU) IN THE 21ST CENTURY THROUGH CONSCIENTIOUS HEALTH EDUCATION

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Abstract

Africa as a continent is faced with so many challenges including poverty, food insecurity, epidemic outbreaks such as HIV/AIDS, indebtedness to foreign countries, political, religious and ethnic related violence amongst others. The result of these challenges in the 21st century has been colossal loss of human and material resources. The vision and mission of the African Union includes the improvement on the health status of every African using the instrument of integration and cooperation amongst member states. This paper presents the fact that health education duly adopted and ratified as a policy and implemented conscientiously would boost the achievement of this noble goal. Good health education would facilitate aid from government and non-government agencies to war-torn countries and regions affected by natural disasters and the status of the continent in terms of health and economy, would be enhanced tremendously, especially in a world fast becoming a global village.

Introduction

The advancement and progress of any nation or continent depends largely on the human and material resources available in that area. This is because these resources form the raw materials for infrastructure development and improvement on the quality of life of the people in the area. Africa as a continent is blessed with abundant human and materials resources. This ranges from crude oil deposits, solid minerals, and rare gems such as diamond, gold, etc. Africa is the world's second largest continent after Asia, with a total surface area, including several surrounding islands, of 30,313,000 square kilometers. It stretches from 40 degrees latitude in the north to 34 35' degrees south and has 54 independent countries - 48 mainland and 6 island states - with an estimated total population of 700 million (WHO 2003). Thus African forms a large bulk of the world's population. Amongst her population are professionals, talented men and woman, geniuses that has made their marks in their various fields of endeavours such as the sciences, literature, technology, economics, business, national and international politics and more. Some of these great Africans have received Nobel prizes and international honours as proofs of their worth to humanity. Examples include Nelson Mandela of South African, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Nkrumah Kwame of Ghana, Professor Wole Soyinka and lots more. There are lots of opportunities in Africa, which include investments in emerging markets and industries such as:

- the oil and gas industry (examples include Nigeria, Angola and Libya, etc);
- mining industry (examples are in West and Central Africa, South Africa, etc);
- international trade (import and export of goods and services in all fields and in most states in the continent.);
- vibrant and growing Telecommunications industry;
- food production and evolving international free trade zones.-

Africa also has great opportunities in its biodiversity, which ranges from Sahara desert to tropical jungle, from snow-capped volcanic Mount Kilimanjaro to the beaches of East and West Africa. These great potentials found in the African soil in terms of human material resources demand that Africa takes its rightful place as a leading continent in the world. However, this is yet to be achieved even in the advent of the 21st century due to the man-made and natural challenges that face the continent. The continent is still bedeviled by underdevelopment and poor standard of living of Africans. This paper recognizes the fact that harnessing Africa's great potentials for her development and growth had been the struggle of her leaders for centuries dating back to the 19th century. The need for emancipation and development had given birth to regional and continental organizations, which aim at using the instrument of cooperation and integration amongst member states in championing the cause of her agenda for Africa. The African Union (AU) is one of the foremost and vibrant Continental organisations with such noble goals for Africa. The AU, founded in July 2002, is the successor organization to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The vision and mission of the AU includes the improvement on the health status of Africans in the 21st century. This paper presents the fact that health education duly adopted, ratified as a policy and Conscientiously implemented by member states would boost the achievement of this goal and more.

Africa's Challenges in the 21st Century

The challenges facing Africa are numerous. They include:

* Poverty

Many Africans still live in poverty and deprivation. Poverty has been described relatively to mean not having enough to eat, a high rate of infant mortality, a low life expectancy, low educational opportunities, poor drinking water, inadequate health care, unfit housing and lack of active participation in decision making process (Bukola, 2004).

• Food Insecurity

Many households in Africa still find it difficult to feed properly due to economic hardship and lack of food. The World Bank had recommended that nutrition for the individual should at least be adequately balanced and should comprise 2,350 Kcal per day (Ogor, 2003). This value is not attainable in most rural households in Africa especially in war torn zones and areas affected by natural disasters.

• Political, Ethnic and Religious Related Violence/Wars

The African Union has had several cases of member states torn by political/religious and ethnic motivated violence in several parts of the continent. These have resulted in loss of lives and destruction of government and public infrastructure and services which run into millions of dollars. Examples include the rebellions and wars in Sudan, Liberia, etc. Most of the causes of the violence have been undemocratic practices by the political class. Others have been ethnic intolerance and corruption of public officials especially those in the political class.

• Economic Strangulation and Foreign Indebtedness

Most African states *are* indebted to the Western World in terms of billions of dollars. These may have been loans taken from wealthier nations or the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. Many governments in the Continent had been pressurized into adopting Structural Adjustment Programmes and other economic reforms that makes the burden of debt payment to be felt as a biting blow to the citizens of these countries. The resultant effect on most African economies has been inflation, loss of value for the local currency, increased unemployment and decline in the national gross domestic product (GDP).

• Disease and Health Related Challenges

Africa is faced with a lot of health challenges in the 21st century. Out breaks of communicable diseases and diseases of malnutrition and deficiencies do abound in the continent. Examples include HIV/AIDS, malaria, cholera, measles, polio, tuberculosis and hepatitis B and C known as the killers diseases (John, 2000). Notably, tuberculosis is among the most frequent opportunistic infections associated with AIDS in Africa. These challenges are complex in the sense that they are, most of them, outcomes of other problems facing the continent. For example, the dreaded Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Disease (HIV/AIDS) had been reported to be closely linked to poverty by the "Save the Children", an international nongovernmental organization based at the United Kingdom. The report states that HIV/AIDS is closely linked to poverty and many of the poorest countries in the world are in Africa. Also, the African Heads of States Summit (2001) submits that in some African countries, as many as one of every three persons is HIV positive and that some youngsters between the ages of 15-24 are being infected with HIV in Africa in every five minutes. This underscores the impact of the disease on the human resources of this struggling continent.

Mortality rates are going up every moment as more people get infected in the 21st century without a cure identified for the disease. The working population is affected, leading to decrease in skilled and unskilled manpower. Production is affected and poverty and economic decline is on the increase in the continent. HIV/AIDS has thus been described as the profound effect in spreading the pandemic. Throughout Africa, cities are growing rapidly. More than one third of Africans now live in cities, and there are more than 30 cities with populations above one million. Yet these cities, which continue to draw people fleeing war or poverty in the countryside, do not provide adequate housing, sanitation or jobs. Most significantly, families most often split themselves between city and countryside to put together enough income to survive. Both the lack of stable family life in the city and the visits by men to their families in the rural areas help promote the spread of AIDS (Farmer, 2001).

Another problem facing Africa in terms of health care is shortage of health personnel. The few trained and qualified health care personnel are travelling out of the continent seeking greener pastures due to lack of good work package and incentives. Others are going into other fields such as politics and business. The resultant effect of lack of adequate and qualified health personnel had led to much loss of lives in the continent. This loss

cuts across ¹¹ strata of the African society. It has brought death to presidents, ministers, cabinet officials, politicians as well as the peasants and poor rural folks without access to primary health care. Example is the recent death of the president of Togo as he was being rushed abroad for medical treatment.

Vision and Mission of the African Union

In response to challenges, Africa has initiated collective action through the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in the protection of environment, fighting international terrorism, combating the scourge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, malaria and tuberculosis or dealing with humanitarian issues such as refugees and displaced persons, landmines, small and light weapons among others. The AU continues with this vision. It is heartwarming to note that Africa is rising up to the numerous challenges facing the continent in the 21st century. Positive action by the leaders in the continent through the birth and vision of the AU is quite commendable and should be supported and sustained. Some of the following are the mission and vision of the AU.

- . To promote sustainable development at the economic, social and cultural levels as well as the integration of African economies in order to make Africa a world power;
- To promote co-operation in all fields of human activity to raise the living standards of African peoples
- . To coordinate and harmonize the policies between the existing and future Regional Economic Communities for the gradual attainment of the objectives of the Union;
- To advance the development of the continent by promoting research in all fields, particularly in science and technology;
- To work with relevant international partners in the eradication of preventable diseases and the promotion of good health in the continent.

Objectives of Health Education

Good health education would bring about the development in people and respective governments. It has these as objectives:

- Inculcating in individuals a sense of responsibility for their own health and for that of the community.
- The knowledge about the cause, prevention, cure and control of communicable diseases. This will minimize the rate of spread of diseases amongst the populace and facilitate the smooth delivery of health care services to the people by health care workers.
- The knowledge about the importance of good nutrition as a means of preventing deficiency diseases in the family and building up a good immune system in the body against possible infections. This includes the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding for nursing mothers both in the rural and urban centers.
- The knowledge of the importance of exercise and recreation in promoting physical, mental and emotional health.

- The ability to participate in community life in a constructive and purposeful way.
- Development of government's policies in harmony with the principles of primary health care and the strategy for all in the 21st century.
- A need for multi-sectored approach to health problems and to increase and improve on health care delivery through appropriate technology.
- The need to develop human resources with the skills to translate social goals (including good health for all) into educational objectives to be obtained by all.
- A culture and tradition that promote personal and community hygiene. This involves encouraging personal and environmental cleanliness and discarding practices that are harmful to health such as female genital mutilation.
- The awareness of the impact of drug abuse and other antisocial habits such as prostitution that is detrimental to health. This involves education for adolescents on the impact of negative peer pressures in order to stem the rising tide of sexually transmitted diseases and drug additions.

Adopting Health Education as National and International Policy

The problems facing Africa require that Africans themselves take actions that will alleviate the suffering and eliminate some of these problems. However, the decisions have to be taken in the light of the right and useful information. Health education provides such information for tackling health related challenges.

Member states of the African Union have been taking certain decision that affect their collective interest. It is now more imperative to draw up a health policy that adopts Health Education at all levels, starting from the grassroots to the national levels, in member states and then internationally amongst states in the continent. It is important to note here also that the health problems of one country can spread to others in the region. Examples include the polio disease that is common amongst the West African states and HIV/AIDS that is prevalent in the entire countries. The different governments must understand the importance of Africans taking the decision to better their -health status. This underscores the blueprint for workable national and international health programmes and services. The individual state budget for health would be more efficiently implemented and useful if preventive measures are put in place in these countries through a conscientious health education that influences the attitudes and behaviors of Africans positively towards their health. Member states adopting Health education and signing to its implementation indicates a binding and legal commitment by these governments to pursue the cause of improving the health of Africans through involving Africans. Again, this adopting would be reflected in the annual budgets for health delivery with a specified percentage for implementation of health education delivery.

The Need for Implementation of Health Education in Africa

In the developed nations, especially the western world, health education is already being implemented and is enjoying a steady, and sometimes increasing, annual subvention of state funds during a period when other sectors of the health services have seen their funding decline year by year (Amos, 2001). In Nigeria, there is a Federal Health Education Unit while each of the thirty six states has a health education unit. Each local government is also supposed to have a health education unit. Working with the information services and the media, health education has raised the awareness of both the urban and rural inhabitants of Nigeria on the preventive measures of common diseases in Nigeria. For example, Health Education through spot announcements and jingles on the radio and television has brought the reality of the presence of AIDS to Nigerians. Health education as a means of enlightening Africans is so important because as in the case AIDS, prevention is not only better than cure, but at the moment prevention is the only option. Recently, there has been a controversy in the northern part of Nigeria on the safety of a polio vaccines for children. A good health education programme eliminates all fears about any health services or a product in the country. Some health agencies, such as National Agencies for Food and Drugs Administration and Control (NAFDAC), in Nigeria are working to safeguard the health of Nigerians from the dangers of fake and adulterated drugs and food products. This invaluable service of this organization can only be successful to a large extent by degree of cooperation from the Nigerian public. This expected cooperation from the public would be only enhanced through a proper health education that enables one to know the dangers of fake and unwholesome food product to health.

Recommendations

• Health Education Methods

This paper advocates that health education as a discipline, course of study, and as a subject should be inculcated into the educational curricula of all member states of the African Union. The resultant effort of this policy in the educational system of all countries, if conscientiously implemented, would be the production of graduates from the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions of learning with adequate health information to make the right choice in matters affecting their health. Other modern ways of getting health education to Africa include the use of Health talks and seminars (local, national and international seminars); through lyrics, songs and entertainment such as drama production and locally produced films and movies and use of the local and rural town criers; the electronic media such as televisions, and national radio; the use of print media such as newspapers, and leaflets and posters; advertisement billboards and road signs and campaigns by non-governmental and governmental health organizations on the prevention and treatment of selected and current health issues (Amos, 2001; Akpobire, 2004).

• Training Health Education Personnel

Parents, guardian, family members, social workers and other members of the community can carry out health education. This form of health education is an informal one done outside the school environment and health service units. In the schools, health education could be carried out by teachers and health personnel attaches to the school. This usually takes the form of school health programmes. It involves health instructions, health services and healthful school environment. The teacher is trained to determine adequate approaches to health instructions such as direct health teachings, health counselling and health appraisal of students under his care.

Health workers found in primary, secondary and tertiary health care systems can also help in delivering useful health information to their patients. These health personnel include doctors, nurses, midwives,

pharmacists, and traditional health care providers. However, there are health education specialists who are specially trained to disseminate health education and information. As early as in ' 1954, the WHO Expert Committee on health education of the public in its first report recommended the need for training of health education specialist (Amos, 2001). These specialists do take the professional responsibilities of ensuring systematic planning, organization, administration and evolution of health education aspect of various health services and programmes in their countries. These specialists may obtain diplomas in health education; master's degree in public health and Doctor of philosophy degree in health education. A person who has a background in health science, natural science, education, and social science etc could undergo health education training. African leaders through the medium of the AU should embark on the training of health education personnel in order to sustain the vision for improved health for Africans in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Health care delivery all over the world has seen the increasing and prominent role of Health Education in enhancing good health. This lies especially on the fact that individuals are involved in the process of care for their health. More important is the role of health education in prevention of communicable disease. Africa should take up the challenge facing its health sector especially in the areas of pandemic out breaks such as HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis and embark on making health education for all a workable policy in the continent. Funds should be made available to the respective ministries of health of member states of the AU and this should be monitored to ensure appropriate implementation of the Health education programmes. In this way, the mission and vision of the AU for improved health for Africans in the 21st century would be achieved and sustained.

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